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CHINA'S MILITARY REFORM PROGRAM: ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

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December 1986

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PREFACE

This study provides an overview of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) reforms in education and training, doctrine and strategy, weapons modernization, personnel, and civil-military relations and their implications. Within each subject category, there is a discussion of the logic behind the reform and its significance for the PLA. The study is based on a variety of open sources, including Chinese and foreign newspapers, periodicals, wire services, books, and journals as of 1 December 1986.

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SUMMARY

The modernization and professionalization of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been one of Deng Xiaoping's primary objectives. To achieve this goal he has focused on improving military education and training. He has deemphasized political indoctrination and is attempting to enhance the position of pro-Deng, pro-reform elements in the military by restricting PLA membership in the Communist Party to graduates of party-sanctioned military academies and schools.

In the course of reforming military doctrine and strategy, there has been considerable debate over possible revisions to Mao's doctrine of People's War. One major point of controversy has been the importance of the initial phase of a war. Those who feel that the initial phase is crucial tend to reject Mao's "luring deep" strategy, while those who consider the initial phase to be insignificant still advocate the concept of a protracted war, arguing that abandoning the "luring deep" strategy would allow PLA units to be outflanked and overrun by an enemy.

Weapons modernization is a fundamental, but costly, element of the PLA reform program. Because defense has been assigned the lowest priority of the Four Modernizations, weapons development will be a slow process. The PLA will rely on domestic weapons production, with limited importation of foreign weapons systems. More sophisticated weaponry must be developed to make up for the large number of troops that have been demobilized, especially if the PLA hopes to be prepared to engage an enemy closer to the border. The weapons modernizations process also could create tension among the services as they compete for procurement priority.

Significant personnel reforms carrying important implications for China and the PLA have been implemented. Some of the over 1 million officers and soldiers demobilized since 1978-79 have had trouble readjusting to civilian life and a few reportedly have even created unrest in certain areas. The forced retirement of elderly officers, coupled with the appointment of reform-minded individuals such as Chief of Staff Yang Dezhi, should ease implementation of the reforms and increase party control over the military.

These personnel reforms figure heavily in Deng's effort to reshape civil-military relations, a key element of the reform program. China's paramount leader is attempting to create a military that is "politically dependent, but militarily independent." To achieve this goal he is trying to distance the military from central political decision making, partly by removing career military men from the Political Bureau. Deng does not intend to remove the PLA from politics altogether, but is trying to mold it into a force that will be supportive of his reform policies. He also is seeking to institutionalize military policy formulation to increase civilian control over the military.

However, as the military becomes more institutionalized and professionalized it might develop a separate corporate identity and exert greater pressure on the party to meet its demands. Finally, Deng envisions a greater role for the PLA in civilian economic construction, which will force the PLA to streamline its defense industry.

PLA MILITARY REFORM: ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is being transformed from a peasant-based, infantry-oriented army into a modernized, professionalized fighting force through a comprehensive military reform program. The goals of this ambitious program are to:

- eliminate incompetents and opponents to reform from the PLA;
- strengthen modern military training;
- rebuild the defense industrial base;
- foster professionalism in the officer corps;
- improve the capabilities of the defense research, development, testing, and evaluation (RDT&E) infrastructure;
- revise fundamental military doctrine, strategy, and tactics; and
- upgrade weapons and equipment.

To achieve these goals the leadership has introduced such measures as: the demobilization of 1 million troops, the forced retirement of elderly officers, the establishment of minimum educational requirements, and the reinstatement of military ranks. Thus far the reforms have concentrated on education and training, the most critical of all of the military reforms. Without the foundation of a well-educated officer corps it would be impossible for the PLA to propel itself into the modern era.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Improvement of PLA education and training is the focal point of the current military reform program. The establishment of military training programs is relatively inexpensive and serves as the foundation for absorption of advanced weapons technology. The development of a well-educated officer corps is also necessary to effectively command the expanded Armed Forces and to formulate more sophisticated strategy and tactics.¹

The reform of PLA education and training has far-reaching implications for China's military establishment, and for Chinese society as a whole. Not only will a better-educated PLA increase military effectiveness, but, as the newly trained soldiers return to civilian life, they will provide a large pool of skilled labor for the civilian sector and serve as a catalyst for strengthening China's overall economy. Emphasis on education and professionalism also can be seen as an effective means for Deng supporters to promote depoliticization of the PLA, primarily by developing a new generation of officers who are more concerned with military command and training responsibilities than with intervention in political affairs. To this end, the reformers have deemphasized political indoctrination and now stress technical competence and weapons training. Eventually, the only PLA elements permitted to enter the party will be graduates of military academies (based on a 1980 decision, which is not yet adhered to throughout the PLA), ensuring that only pro-Deng members of the PLA, who have completed a party-sanctioned military education program, will be granted party membership.² The implementation of educational minimums for promotion consideration and

attendance at "spare-time" schools should significantly improve educational levels of the PLA officer corps and will help to undermine opposition to intellectualism and specialization.³

Not all of the effects of the PLA educational reform program have been positive, however. A better-educated officer corps could create a "class gap" between the officers and the rank-and-file. As the officer corps becomes more professionalized, it might begin to be viewed as an elite, "bourgeois" clique, causing internal problems for the PLA.⁴ In search of more technically-oriented recruits, the PLA will look increasingly to urban areas, which may jeopardize the military's image as a peasant army. There also exists a general feeling among cadres that only nonessential or surplus cadres are sent to school and that classroom training interferes with career advancement.⁵

DOCTRINE AND STRATEGY

China has revised its doctrine of "People's War" to "People's War Under Modern Conditions." The amended doctrine builds on the principles of People's War developed by Mao Zedong in the 1930s, adapting them to the demands of modern warfare and current PLA capabilities. The shift emphasizes positional warfare over mobile warfare, and calls for an abandonment of the "luring deep" strategy in favor of engaging the enemy closer to the border.⁶

Implementation of a more forward defense will require military operations that will be successful in the early stages of a war, an issue which has created intense debate among Chinese strategists. Some, such as Zong He, a research associate at the Beijing Institute of International Strategic Studies (BIISS), argue that the rear areas are no longer safe from attack because of advanced weaponry and therefore the initial battles of a war are crucial. This argument implicitly questions the concept of protracted war, because if modern weaponry enables the enemy to penetrate deeply in the initial offensive, then there is little likelihood that a protractive strategy will be successful. Long-range nuclear and conventional weaponry will be able to knock out industrial bases and strike reserve forces, rendering them useless in a long war. Others downplay the importance of the early stages of a war, arguing that China does have the ability to fight a protracted war and that therefore the initial battles are relatively insignificant. The proponents of this argument contend that the initial stages of a war do not determine who will win the war.⁷

Maoist elements in the party and military have been highly critical of the doctrinal reform, arguing that Mao's success in capturing cities from the countryside during the Chinese Civil War provides ample evidence of the desirability of mobile over positional warfare. They also contend that a shift away from the "luring deep" strategy to a more forward defense could open PLA units to being outflanked and overrun by an enemy.

WEAPONS MODERNIZATION

China is eager to acquire and eventually produce advanced weaponry, but is constrained by a lack of capital and limited technical know-how. Since defense is the lowest priority of the Four Modernizations, progress in weapons development will be incremental and will depend to a great extent on the civilian economic sector to provide the requisite capital and technical advances for defense modernization. China's weapons capabilities will not see marked improvement in the foreseeable future, and short-term PLA force enhancements will only peripherally affect China's military power. So far, Chinese military might has been said to have moved only from the 1950s to the 1960s. The defense budget for 1985 was only 11.9 percent of the total state budget,¹² and the Seventh 5-Year Plan (1986-90) will reduce defense spending by \$32 billion, from 13.1 percent to 9.1 percent of total spending.¹³ Clearly, with such low spending levels, it will take many years for China to become a modern fighting force. Some analysts predict that the PLA will not be fully modernized until the middle of the 21st century. However, despite the low defense allocation, there is little evidence of deep dissatisfaction with the military budget. The PLA is a labor-intensive army. It realizes that to properly arm itself would require massive expenditures on technology. Therefore, the PLA has chosen to modernize gradually, allowing for long-term planning and the spreading of costs.

Nevertheless, the modernization of weapons and equipment is a key component of the military reform program. China is interested in developing conventional and nuclear arms, and stresses the development of communications, electronics, and missiles. It realizes, however, that weapons modernization will come slowly and will rely primarily on domestic development, with limited aid from the West. The critical factor will be the ability to train scientists and engineers to master the technology necessary to develop advanced weapons systems either through reverse engineering or indigenous creativity. In the long term, this policy of self-reliance will be advantageous to the Chinese, but for now it costs them much more to make a piece of sophisticated weaponry domestically than it does to buy it abroad.⁸ When purchasing foreign arms, China often likes to acquire one unit of a particular weapons system to reverse-engineer--a long, tedious, and often unsuccessful process.

A popular slogan for the PLA has been "the world's best fighters should be equipped with the world's best weapons."⁹ Before it can be considered a credible fighting force, the PLA needs to significantly upgrade its weaponry, much of which is severely outdated. Zhang Zhen, the president of the National Defense University which opened in September 1986, believes that weapons and equipment are an important yardstick for measuring the level of modernization of an armed force and argues that modern troops must have advanced weapons. Yang Shangkun, Secretary General of the Party Central Military Commission, has

stated that "with the improvement in the sophisticated standard of weapons, equipment, and command systems, the number of soldiers can be properly reduced."¹⁰ In other words, the large number of demobilized troops can be compensated for through significant improvements in weapons and equipment.

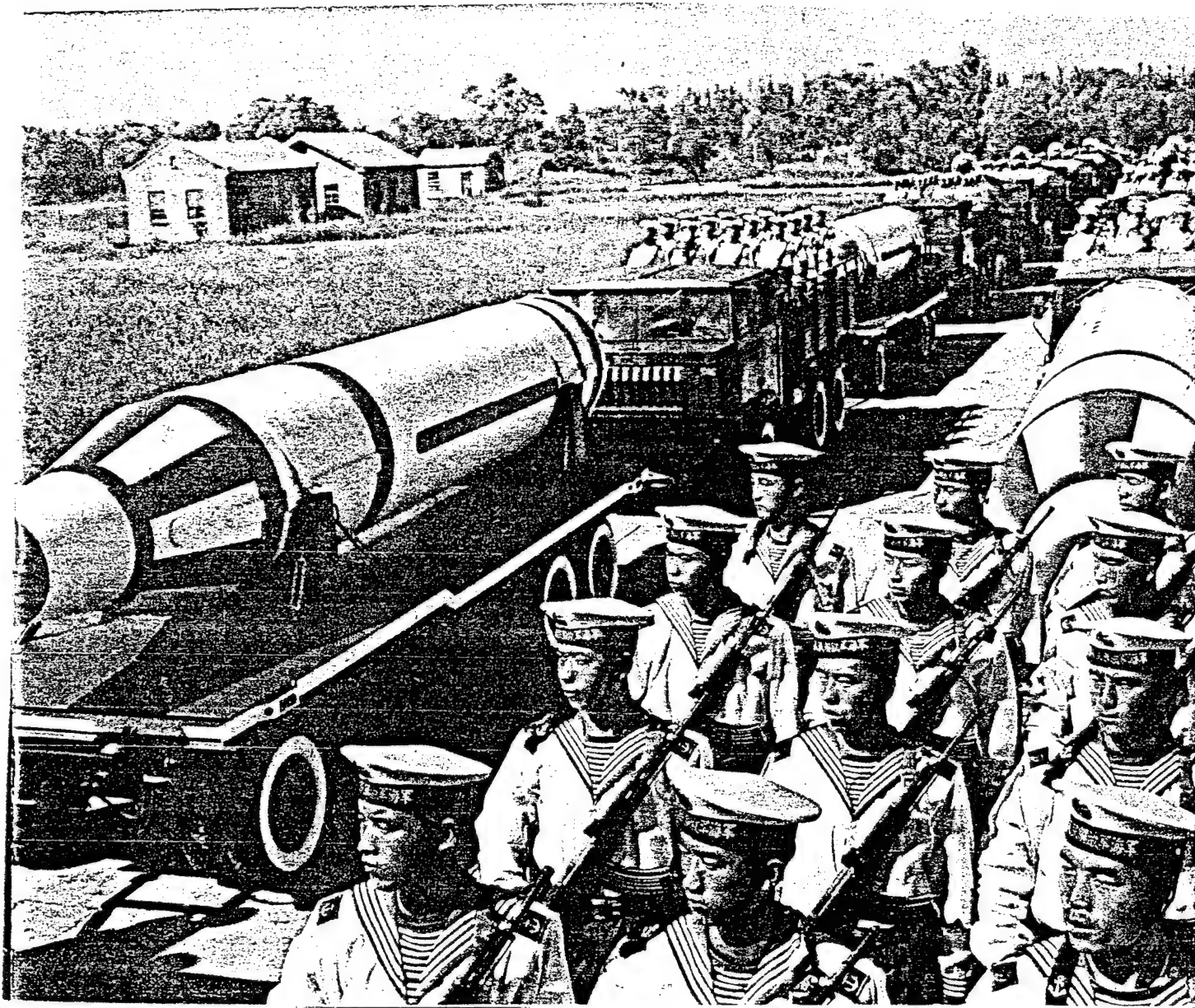


Figure 1. Chinese naval forces marching with missile weaponry.
[SOURCE: Beijing Review, vol. 28, no. 18, 6 May 1985, front cover]

Another reason for the importance of weapons modernization is the change in the doctrine of People's War, which calls for engagement of the enemy closer to the border. The PLA must now be able to react quickly and effectively, and, therefore, must have a high-quality early warning system, reliable and effective antiaircraft and antitank systems, a capable defensive air force and mobile logistics, and command and control systems.¹¹

The weapons modernization process probably will lead to increased tension between main forces and local forces, and among the Ground Forces, Navy, Air Force, and 2d Artillery, as they vie for procurement priority. The centralization and modernization of both strategy and force structure could cause conflict between current regional military requirements and future planning for an independent national defense industry. China may be tempted to import a greater number of foreign weapons to meet critical needs, which would hinder the development of an indigenous military industry. Furthermore, China may feel that the importation of weapons will infringe upon national sovereignty because of a loss of geopolitical independence to more global strategic actors.¹⁴

PERSONNEL

A major goal of the Deng leadership has been the reorganization and rejuvenation of the Armed Forces. To achieve this goal, Deng has called for a number of significant reforms, including the demobilization of 1 million troops, the forced retirement of elderly officers and promotion of younger officers, increased emphasis on professionalism, and the reinstatement of the system of military ranks.

Demobilization--designed to increase efficiency and reduce costs--generally has been successful, but trouble spots still exist. For example, the Chinese press admits that many demobilized soldiers, particularly the officers and their families, are having difficulty readjusting to civilian life.¹⁵ Reportedly, some demobilized soldiers have led demonstrations against the Deng leadership. One group, known as the Disillusioned Army, in 1980 allegedly stormed communes and county-level party organs in Wuchuan County, Guangdong Province, and set up the "Disillusioned Army's Restaurant" as a liaison office.¹⁶

The forced retirement of elderly officers:

- accelerates the removal of senior officers who might try to block or hinder implementation of civilian and military reforms;
- decreases conservatism in the PLA and increases the party's control over the Army;
- decreases generational conflict within the PLA; and
- permits a rethinking of military doctrine.

The older officers, who have become accustomed to involvement in political affairs since the PLA intervened to restore order during the Cultural Revolution, tend to be conservative thinkers who are generally opposed to the military reforms. They also have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo to hold on to their positions of power. However, the forced retirement of senior officers is clearing the way for a younger generation of officers who, as beneficiaries in the rejuvenation move, are more likely to support the reformers.¹⁷ The removal of the older, Maoist officers will allow the younger, "pro-reform" officers to function without a strong opposition group, making it easier to implement reforms and to revise military doctrine and strategy. Furthermore, because they were selected at least in part because of their loyalty to the current party leadership, this generation probably will be grateful to the reformers and more inclined to obey the leadership of the party.¹⁸ The younger officers also are better educated and probably more willing to learn new methods and techniques and accept new ideas.

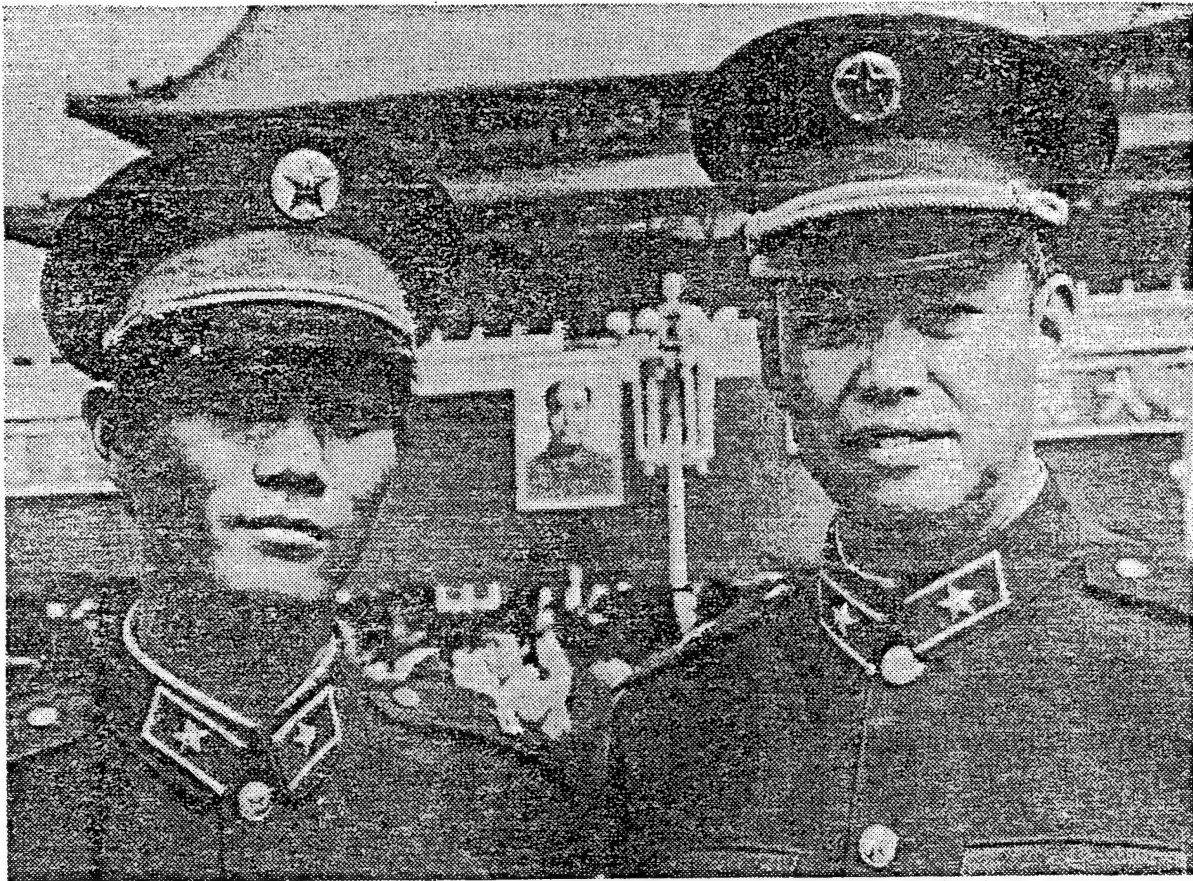


Figure 2. Two PLA officers wearing their new uniforms at Tiananmen in Beijing. [SOURCE: The Washington Post, 2 May 1985, A25]

Personnel changes, designed to ease implementation of the reform program, also have been a key ingredient in the military reform program. The appointments of Yang Dezhi as Chief of Staff, Yang Shangkun as Secretary General of the Party Central Military Commission, Zhang Aiping as Minister of National Defense, and Zhang Tingfa as Commander of the PLA Air Force demonstrate that Deng is seeking to fill top-level military positions with individuals who are committed to the concept of a professionalized, modernized military, and who are relatively unconcerned with political and ideological campaigns.¹⁹ The replacement of Geng Biao, who was a Political Bureau member, with Zhang Aiping, who is not a Political Bureau member, can be seen as an attempt to increase the authority and credibility of state-associated institutions. In addition, Zhang is associated with the prestigious nuclear program, and his appointment to Minister of National Defense may have been an attempt to revitalize that ministry, a state organ, as a channel for military policymaking.

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Through various reform measures, Deng Xiaoping has been trying to create a PLA that is "politically dependent, but militarily independent," with little political clout, but considerable freedom to make its own decisions regarding military doctrine tactics, organization, and training.²⁰ To help attain this goal, Deng has pushed for the removal of key military officials from the Political Bureau. At the September 1985 National Conference of Delegates of the Chinese Communist Party, the following military men "resigned" their Political Bureau posts (see figure 3):

- o Ye Jianying (deceased), former Vice Chairman, CCP Central Military Commission;
- o Li Desheng, Political Commissar, National Defense University;
- o Zhang Tingfa, former Commander, Air Force;
- o Wei Guoqing, former member, CCP Central Military Commission;
- o Wang Zhen, former member, CCP Central Military Commission;
- o Xu Xiangqian, Vice Chairman, CCP and State Central Military Commissions;
- o Nie Rongzhen, Vice Chairman, CCP and State Central Military Commissions.

The only remaining Political Bureau members that are career military are Yang Shangkun, Secretary General of the Party Central Military Commission, Yang

Figure 3.

Diminishing Military Presence in the Chinese Communist Party
Political Bureau

Standing Committee	Age**	Resigned	
Hu Yaobang	71	*Ye Jianying (deceased)	
Deng Xiaoping	82		
Zhao Ziyang	67		
Li Xiannian	79		
Chen Yun	81		
Other Members			
Incumbent	Age**	Resigned	Age**
Ni Zhifu	54	*Li Desheng	70
Wan Li	70	*Zhang Tingfa	68
Fang Yi	70	*Wei Guoqing	73
*Yu Qiuli	72	*Song Renqiong	77
Xi Zhongxun	73	*Wang Zhen	78
Hu Qiaomu	74	Ulanhu	80
*Yang Dezhi	76	Deng Yingchao	82
*Yang Shangkun	79	*Xu Xiangqian	85
Peng Zhen	84	*Nie Rongzhen	87
Appointed in September 1985			
	Age**	Position	
Hu Qili	57	Secretary, CCP Secretariat	
Tian Jiyun	57	Vice Premier, State Council	
Li Peng	58	Vice Premier, State Council	
Qiao Shi	62	Vice Premier, State Council; Director, Organization Department, CCP-CC	
Wu Xueqian	65	State Councillor; Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	
Yao Yilin	69	Vice Premier, State Council	
Alternate			
	Age**		
Chen Muhua	65		
*Qin Jiewi	72		

* Career military

** As of year-end 1986.

Dezhi, Chief of the General Staff, Yu Qiuli, Head of the PLA General Political Department, and Qin Jiwei, Commander of the Beijing Military Region, all of whom are supporters of Deng's military reform program. Furthermore, no new military members were appointed in September 1985. It is clear, therefore, that, organizationally at least, the military is being removed from top-level political decisionmaking and policy formulation.

In order to facilitate civilian control over the military the Deng group is also attempting to institutionalize military policy formation. The plan is part of Deng's overall goal of more clearly delineating party and state functions to give nonparty organizations greater decisionmaking power and reduce the duplication of state and party functions. Providing state organizations with more power also will serve as a buffer between the party and various groups vying to influence political decisionmaking. For example, since the creation of the State Central Military Commission in 1982, the PLA's channels for intervention in central politics may now be diffused among three organizations: the Party Central Military Commission, the State Central Military Commission, and the Ministry of National Defense. Also, the State Central Military Commission may be required to base military procurement policy on overall economic planning, which would ensure that military modernization adheres to the goals and priorities of the Four Modernizations program. Apparently, Deng is trying to prevent the development of a powerful military industrial complex that would demand a significant portion of State economic resources. As Deng attempts to professionalize and depoliticize the PLA, the overlap between the party and military may diminish, resulting in sharper distinctions between the two and the replacement of coalition formation with confrontation. Under these circumstances the PLA could develop separate corporate interests and apply greater pressure on the party to meet budgetary and other demands.²¹

Despite Deng's efforts to depolitize the PLA, his reform program does not entail a total elimination of the military's political role. He is not attempting to remove party control or presence from the PLA. Rather he is trying to make the military more receptive to the reform measures. Indeed, since it emerged during the Cultural Revolution to restore order, the PLA has become accustomed to involvement in central politics and considers itself essential to maintaining stability. As a result there is a significant amount of overlap in office holding, with military men in key political positions. Because of its long-standing involvement in political affairs and the serious blurring of institutional lines, some argue that the PLA will probably continue to play a significant role in Chinese politics.

There have been varying reactions to Deng's policy of restricting the PLA's political role. In general, the professional military has been supportive of increased State control over the PLA, and has not rebelled against depoliticization.²² Some have even welcomed the reforms, because they allow the PLA to concentrate on the business of force modernization without being sidetracked by political or ideological concerns. Younger officers tend to be more supportive of Deng's reform policies, which increases the political unity of the party and Army.

The military reform program encourages the PLA to produce goods for civilian use, to make facilities and equipment available to the civilian sector, and to exchange technology and ideas with civilian organizations. Chinese officials claim that, by 1990, 80 percent of the nation's military production facilities will be producing goods for the civilian sector. Since 1984 the PLA has made airports, as well as airplanes, railroad cars, and other equipment available at cost to civilian enterprises and has engaged in some business activities, such as managing hotels, which have earned precious foreign exchange.²³ According to Vice Minister Liu Shulin, the Ministry of Nuclear Industry, which in the past performed a primarily military function, will have 60 to 70 percent of personnel serving civilian needs by 1990. The primary purpose of these plans and activities is to use the military to support overall economic modernization. The emphasis on civilian production is not an abandoning of defense production, but an attempt to make use of currently underutilized military factories, which have experienced a sharp drop in military contracts in recent years.²⁴ If fully implemented, the civilian assistance program should contribute significantly to economic modernization and will also help the PLA to streamline its defense industry and earn foreign exchange for defense purchases.

CONCLUSION

Because the military reforms are still being implemented, it is too early to predict exactly what their impact will be on the PLA. However, it does appear that the reforms are fundamentally changing the nature of the Chinese Armed Forces. Prompted by the dismal performance in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the PLA is slowly being transformed into a modern professional military establishment. The revisions in the doctrine of People's War will allow for greater flexibility to respond to the demands of modern warfare. The development of sophisticated weaponry will enable the PLA to effectively engage an enemy closer to the border and will make up for the reductions in personnel. In order to implement more sophisticated strategy and tactics and to use the advanced weaponry and equipment, the PLA is focusing on improving the quality of its troops through its revitalized system of military academies and schools. The schools now stress professionalism and modern training, and officers who come up through this system are likely to be committed to the modern rather than the Maoist approach. Major personnel changes, including the removal of veteran PLA officers from the Political Bureau, will restrict the PLA's formal channels of influence in central political decisionmaking. The attempt to eliminate Maoists from the PLA is a crucial objective of Deng and his followers. Deng has stated that "If we cannot solve this problem before we die, our country will be in a great turmoil."²⁵

The effects of the sudden demobilization of 1 million troops are difficult to gauge. On the one hand it frees up a large pool of workers for involvement in civilian economic construction. On the other hand these individuals could conceivably be difficult to reassimilate into civilian life. There already have been reports of disturbances and confrontations between the demobilized soldiers and civilians. In the area of civil-military relations, Deng is attempting to limit the PLA's political role and encouraging it to focus on

military issues. Deng continues to face considerable opposition throughout the PLA to his reform policies, and the "de-Maofication" of the Army will be a slow process. Overall, however, the reformers have made great strides toward the creation of a modern Armed Force. At the very least, they have laid the groundwork for future reforms.

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